

Selecting a Multivitamin/mineral: Making the Right Choice

Perhaps one of the most cost-effective forms of “health insurance” available to everyone is a multivitamin/mineral supplement. The true purpose of taking a multivitamin/mineral (MVM) is to ensure that your body receives 100% of what it needs for proper function. Unless one eats a perfect diet day in and day out, a MVM is necessary to patch any ‘holes’ in the diet. And even if one does eat a perfect diet, factors ranging from stress levels, absorption states of the body, and activity levels can all influence how much of the essential nutrients our bodies need each day. One of the greatest false accusations against taking a MVM is that “it’s all being lost through urination”. True, MVM’s tend to make urine more colorful; however, it must be duly noted that the human body is not 100% efficient (in fact it is more like 30% efficient, similar to a gasoline engine!) and therefore cannot absorb all of the food and drink that is consumed each day. Hence, our daily bathroom habits. So, just because a portion of the MVM is visible in the urine, does not mean that your body isn’t absorbing and using the supplement.

The choices available today are certainly overwhelming. It seems that everyone is selling supplements, especially MVMs. There are several reasons for this, however what is important is that as consumers, we must be as savvy when making health-related choices as we (hopefully) are when making other economic decisions. With a loosely regulated field and slick marketing, it’s important to choose supplement companies judiciously to assure that we receive exactly what we intend to purchase. No more. No less. Fantastic claims used to sell products are quite common in the supplement industry. If it sounds too good to be true, then guess what-it is!

Because both vitamins and minerals cannot be made in the body, we must obtain them from foods. Despite popular opinion that one can obtain all the vitamins and minerals from diet alone, different people have different requirements. Keep in mind that the RDAs listed on packages are designed to ensure that the large majority of the population will not be deficient, or in other words, the RDAs are designed to prevent deficiency states, not to optimize health! This being said, active individuals require more energy than others making a MVM an important part of the health regimen. Research has shown that many athletes in fact do not have adequate intakes of vitamins and minerals.

There are several quality indicators consumers can rely on. One place to start is looking at what a supplement does not have. Today’s choices include Kosher, vegetarian, and hypoallergenic (yeast, starch, sugar, dairy, wheat, and dairy-free) supplements. Unnecessary ingredients include artificial coloring agents, fillers, binders and even coatings; all of which are included to make the vitamin visually appealing and to hold large doses together.

- Pricing: If it seems outrageous, than it is. This goes for both very expensive supplements and very cheap supplements. If it costs more than \$30 dollars for a large bottle, you may want to consider something a little less glamorous.

Remember, MVMs are meant as “icing on the cake” (organic, sugar-free cake, that is) to your already healthy diet. On the other hand, if the MVM you select seems incredibly cheap, well then you may be getting what you are paying for, not much. (The cost of vitamins largely depends on the amount of nutrients included, and the type. Well-absorbed nutrients cost more than ones that do not absorb well...hence a poor choice of supplement).

- Dose: Dosing recommendations range from one-a-day to 6 a day. A one-a-day MVM is probably fine...however oftentimes MVM packaged this way must contain binders as part of their nature-in order to jam all of those nutrients in that one pill, binders are necessary to hold it all together. Because of this, there is speculation that these MVMs may be very difficult for your body to digest and assimilate due to the 'glue' holding the vitamin together. At the other end of the spectrum, many manufacturers recommend 6 capsules a day. These will often have the same dosage as the one a day. This can be tedious of course, because after all, aren't you taking vitamins so you don't have to take all of those other pills? And with some brands recommending 6 a day, there is speculation that this recommendation is made to enhance the 'more is better' mentality-so prevalent today.
- Getting help: If you consult a health care provider regarding supplementation, make sure you speak to one that is knowledgeable about clinical nutrition and uses supplements in their practice. Not all supplements are the same, and paying a bit more for higher quality will ensure that you are getting your money's (and your body's) worth.

Dr. Jason E. Barker

Integrative Sports Medicine & General Practice

Back In Motion Sports Injuries Clinic

11385 SW Scholls Ferry Road

Beaverton, OR 97008

503.524.9040

*This information is provided for general informational purposes only and cannot substitute for medical advice, diagnosis or treatment provided by a medical professional. It is not a substitute for a medical evaluation and should not take the place of a proper exam by a physician.

Copyright 2006 by Dr. Jason E. Barker